

THE CLAIMS DEFINING THE INVENTION ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. A method of packaging a fresh product including the steps of:
 - 5 harvesting the product while fresh;
 - treating the product whilst substantially fresh from harvest in order to enhance the storage properties of the product;
 - 10 packaging the product into a package which extends the shelf life of the product;
 - characterised in that the package is microwavable such that the produce can be heated in a microwave whilst in the package so as to be ready for serving directly to the consumer from the package, and in that there is
 - 15 naturally occurring movement of gases within the package thereby allowing interaction to take place between the product located within the package and gases in the atmosphere in order to eliminate the need for mechanical or chemical interference of the product in the package.
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2. A method according to any preceding claim, characterised in that heating of the product includes steaming the product in the microwavable package using a microwave and serving the package onto the table ready for
- 25 consumption.
3. A method according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the method further includes: treating the fresh or recently picked or harvested product with one
- 30 or more cleaning steps to enhance the organoleptic and/or storage properties of the product.
4. A method according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the cleaning step includes
- 35 contacting the product with a cleaning preparation that includes soaps, Neem oil or the like.

5. A method according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the cleaning step include the use of ozone, ultrasonic techniques, sanitisers, chlorine or the like, either alone or in combination.

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6. A method according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the cleaning treatment involves removal or elimination of thrip and/or other unwanted insect, disease condition or the like.

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7. A package containing a product when made in accordance with the process of any preceding claim.

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8. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the product is produce, preferably fresh produce, and more preferably fresh fruit or vegetables.

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9. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the fresh fruit or vegetable is asparagus.

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10. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the asparagus is fresh asparagus having substantially no additives or artificial materials added to it, such as having no added preservatives or conditioners or the like added to the asparagus either before, during or after processing or the like.

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11. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the package is a punnet, container, tray or the like.

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12. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the punnet is made from a plastics or synthetic material or is a combination of a

plastics or synthetic material.

13. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the punnet includes a base and a lid, wherein the base is made from a polypropylene material or a propylene - containing material or contains polypropylene which is microwave-safe and environmentally friendly.
14. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the polypropylene base has been adapted or modified for specific use with fresh fruit or vegetables, preferably asparagus.
15. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the punnet has a modified atmosphere, a modified micro-atmosphere or is a Modified Interactive punnet (MIP) or the like.
16. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the punnet is a Modified Interactive punnet (MIP) of the type allowing flow through of gases associated with the products and/or atmosphere of the punnet to enhance the storage and/or organoleptic properties of the product.
17. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the lid is made from a polypropylene material, a polyvinyl chloride material, a polyethylene terephthalate material or similar materials having desirable properties.
18. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the lid and base of the package is made from a polypropylene material, a polypropylene-containing material or polypropylene or contains polypropylene.

19. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the package creates naturally occurring movement of gases across and through the walls and base of the punnet, thereby allowing interaction to take place between the product located within the package and gases in the atmosphere within the package in order to eliminate the need for mechanical or chemical interference or modification of the product.
20. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the gases in the atmosphere include oxygen, carbon dioxide, water vapour or the like.
21. A method or package according to any preceding claim characterised in that the gases in the atmosphere include oxygen of greater than 5%, carbon dioxide up to 10%, preferably the amount of oxygen is from 5% to 20% and carbon dioxide is from 5% to 9%.
22. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the asparagus packed in accordance with the present invention using the package of the present invention remains fresh for up to about 6 weeks or longer, preferably up to about 20 days or longer, and more preferably about 14 days or longer.
23. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the package enhances nutrient retention, reduces weight loss of the product during transportation, storage, distribution and improves product integrity for long periods, preferably a weight loss of less than about 1%.
24. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the method and package provides pre-packed, ready-to-eat, eat-and-serve

convenience foods that can be stored, distributed, transported, cooked, heated or the like in the same packages without adverse effects on the product in the package.

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25. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the package includes a ready-to-serve product in combination with a sauce sachet or similar.

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26. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the punnet is a free standing punnet or is a hang-cell pack or other form of pack.

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27. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the asparagus useful in packaging is non-export quality or non-domestic market quality asparagus, but is otherwise of a high quality.

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28. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the lengths or spears of asparagus are cut using a suitable means to a predetermined or preselected length.

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29. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that after cutting, the lengths of asparagus are washed to remove any contamination.

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30. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that after washing, the lengths of asparagus are further treated to increase their storage properties, appearance or other properties by being chill-washed or similar.

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31. A method or package according to any preceding claim, in which the treated asparagus lengths or pieces are dewatered using a current of air or similar.

32. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the asparagus is provided in one or more cut forms or in a reduced size form, including
5 pieces, chunks, lumps, slices, lengths, spears or the like.

33. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the asparagus is cut to a
10 predetermined size to fit into the package and to be suitable for heating, cooking or the like.

34. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the size of the lengths of
15 asparagus is determined by the diameter of the spears and can be controlled so that the tips of the asparagus need to be bigger than the more solid stem pieces to ensure that even cooking occurs in the microwave.

20 35. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the produce includes nuts, vegetables, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, mushrooms, beans or the like and fruits such as grapes, oranges, citrus fruits, tangelos or the like.

25 36. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the packs are provided with tamper-proof or tamper-evident devices, labels or the like to ensure the contents of the pack have not been
30 contaminated or interfered with by providing a visual indication that interference has occurred.

37. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the produce is subjected to a
35 dewatering step.

38. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that the dewatering step is effected by using a current of air, mechanical means such as spin drying, or a combination of both.

39. A method or package according to any preceding claim, characterised in that excess moisture is removed from the produce by the dewatering step.

40. A method or package substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the foregoing examples.

41. A method or package substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawing.

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